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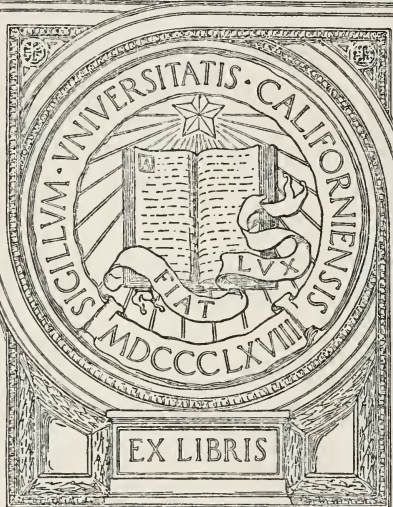
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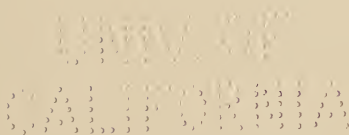
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**The Child's
Eden**

The Child's Eden

By E. L. M.



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EXCHANGE

THIS SKETCH IS REPUBLISHED THROUGH THE
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TO VINU
ABROU LIAO

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To
M. P.

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THE CHILD'S EDEN.

The Child was in its seventh year, and the Garden, twelve times as old, was on the island. The House also was on the same island, and was the place where the Child ate and slept and obeyed. But its life was in the Garden.

The House faced a pond, and two bridges bound it and the Garden to the World. By the lower bridge stood the old mill; and when its gate was raised a flood of water boiled and twisted down to a smooth gravel bed below, and then floated quietly to the Garden's foot. Over against the upper bridge, a mighty dam held the island from destruction. When the pond back of it was full, the water poured in a smooth, green stream over it, and was dashed into spray and foam and torn to shreds on the jagged rocks below.

In summer-time when there had been but little

rain-fall the great timber of the dam was bare, and the Child, when no one was looking, could walk fearfully across, between the line of water shelving to the right and the black mass of sheer rock at the left. Then it was that the Child could climb over the low stone wall that kept the Garden in, and go down among the jewel-weed and stramonium, and clawing blackberry vines that took toll of gown and apron, and explore the pools and bottomless pits in the river-bed. The water always stood in these, dark and still, however severe the drought ; and no stick ever sounded the depth of the largest of them.

So it must have been bottomless, like some of the fearful things one heard read on Sundays in Scripture. And though the Child, with the hair of its flesh standing up, dropped in stones, and even reached down an arm's length, and brought longer sticks, and tried them again and again, the deep pool was a kind of sacred mystery for ever. If the Child had not been alone, if it had had a brother, one fascination of its seventh year must have been lost.

There were holes without number in the bed of this stream, and sharp-pointed rocks ; so that when the pond above was full it was a grand torrent that foamed roaring to the harbor, where it found the quiet mill-stream curling round the Garden's foot. A steep bank at the right shut the river from the world, and so made it the Child's own for ever.

On the pond, made classic as Windermere by song, geese floated double in the long summer days, and lent enchantment, and birds nested in the elms that dipped their branches in the water, and bees hummed in the clover. Then the expanse narrowed, and a simple river met it, creeping along by the highway, floating between two guardian churches with tall steeples, under a long bridge, and so through the town to the mill and dam.

The Child's thought went backward with it, always starting at the foot of the Garden. The stream bore an Indian name, and might have had its source in the midst of campfires and wigwams, and birch-bark canoes, and frightful war-whoops and tomahawks, perhaps a mile, possibly

two miles away. Miles were vague measures, like time.

There were two lesser things in the Child's life: the Mill and the Dame School. The first belonged to an old, old man, like those persons who lived before the flood; whose hat and hair and coat and eyebrows were always white, yes, and his boots, and whatever else he wore. There was a soft, rumbling kind of silence always within the mill, where the hoppers made little whirlpools of dusty grain, going down and down and down; and the Child leaned over with a thrill tingling its whole body, and knew that itself could be drawn down and down and down into the wide, floury bags below, choked and lost for ever. The soft dust filled the air and softened the sunlight and whitened the cobwebs among the rafters, and it was all something apart from the World and the Garden.

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The second thing was the Dame School, where a very old lady, years older than the miller, kept ten prisoners on an upper floor of her own house, from nine till twelve, and from one till four, every day but Saturday. The Child did

not then know that liberty was only sweet when bought with a great price.

Every morning as the clock paused on the stroke of nine, the Dame folded her hands and prayed, sitting upright like Buddha, while her Captives knelt, each in its place. At the right hand of the Image stood the best girl of the school, nine years old, perfect in word and deed and called Monitor, who walked around on tip-toe and rapped on the head with the ferrule any culprit who peeped out. It was a diabolic plot, not fully appreciated at the time by the prisoners; for who could hear the stealthy approach of Calamity and blindly wait, not knowing which way to dodge? So heaven alone had the benefit of the morning prayer.

All day long, winter and summer, summer and winter, like Eternity, the Child thought, little hands knitted and sewed, with book always in lap. The daily "stent" was marked by the Fate in cap and spectacles, sitting in a high arm-chair, and no child left the room till its task was perfectly finished.

The spelling-class of six stood with toes on a

crack of the wide floor-board nearest the teacher, where her long arm, like Justice's, could reach any offender, and where nothing could be hidden from her all-seeing eye. The first child in the row named "Baker" and spelled it; the second named "Shady" and spelled it; the third named "Lady" and spelled it; the fourth named "Tidy" and spelled it. But if Number Two, twisting nervous fingers in her apron, named "Lady" instead of "Shady," her fingers were rapped for moving, and she was disgraced and sent to the foot. For order stood on a level with accuracy at this tribunal. There was no Figure Five on a half-inch square of paper for Number Two that day to hoard in her pasteboard match-box; no drink from the tin dipper, however parched the little lips might be. For these precious Figure Fives had to be parted with, one for every drink of brackish water that stood in a wooden pail in the entry. Five Fives were exchangeable at long periods for one Ten; ten Tens for a two-inch Reward of Merit. The Child alone was not dazzled at sight of even the final Reward gained at such loss and pain, but

drank its fill daily and wondered at the others. Sometimes it wondered also if the warm, tinny taste of the water drawn from a well too near the sea had any connection with the Reward.

The miller's daughter, Abigail, a thin, lint-haired child, with pale blue eyes, knitted long stockings for her tall brother, who was a man. The Child thought of him as Saul, he stood so much higher than his brethren. One day when the long stocking had grown by painful half inches nearly to the toe, the sharp eyes of Dame Fate discovered a dropped stitch in the beginning of the leg, and ravelled it all out from bottom to top. Tears for little Abigail, and no Figure Five !

The heart of the Child was hot within its bosom as it saw fall one after one the pink and blue and yellow and red yarn-marks like mile-stones all along the way—marks knitted in by the teacher's bony fingers and tied in hard knots on the wrong side ; marks never to be removed save by the mistress-hand when the task was done. It seemed like a waste of life. But Abigail took up her weary "bouts" again, with the patience of despair.

Every other Saturday morning school kept, that Satan might not have too much verge and opportunity, and the Catechism was ground into the tough fibre of memory in place of other tasks. But the sewing and knitting kept on. At one of these every-others, the Child looked out between the two lengths of window-curtain, and saw a shaggy dog bounding in and out of the water, and laughed softly to itself. But Dame Fate, whose eyes were everywhere beholding the evil, spied the crime, pinned the curtains closer together, set two sharp thumbs in the hollows of the small shoulders, shook the Child dizzy, and turned its back to the school, where it learned, as an extra task, "The Lord is my shepherd," etc. It was the old-fashioned way of teaching children to love the Bible.

The Catechism question for the day was, "Wherein consists the sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell?" And the answer, "The sinfulness-of-that-estate-whereinto-man-fell-consists-in-the-guilt-of-Adam's-first-sin-the-want-of-original-righteousness-and-the-corruption-of-his-whole-nature-which-is-commonly-called-original-

sin - together - with - all - actual - transgressions-
which-proceed-from-it."

But the Child was far away. Even the whimpering of the A B C babes under the ferrule for rustling about did not bring tears as usual, for its eyes were set on green pastures where little white lambs kicked up their free heels, and mother-sheep took no notice, but nibbled and ba-a-d all day long, as if there were no harm in it. The leading-beside-still-waters made quite another picture, but might it not be done by some older, wiser playmate with a string, to keep the Child safely on shore between river and meeting mill-stream, where chip-vessels would float and dip and veer distractedly, go under, and rise again? The paths of righteousness took thought, but might they not be those that led from porch to garden-gate, where one never disobeyed, or ran outside of bounds—never but once?

That was last year, when November winds were bleak, and the Child, at Abigail's beckoning, across the mill-stream, strayed out and to the lower bridge in a vagrant way, looking for

Something, neither child knew what. So they stopped at the Gentle Lady's door and asked to see the squirrels in the whirling cage that smelt warm and foreigny, and fed them with hickory nuts; and Time went on. Then they took hold of hands, and ran and ran and ran, swinging down the hill, and the Child fell in the sand at the bottom and knew it would never breathe again.

Then they strolled across the way to the Queer House with sanded floor, where the Child slipped and fell, and the miller's daughter, who had been there before, snatched up the unusual guest, shook off the sand, and went on to the dark, low room where the Queer Lady, like her of Shallot, weaved all day long and cared for nothing else. She wore a strange woollen gown, coarse of texture—for the Child took a pinch of a stray fold that left bare a bony neck except for a snuffy kerchief twisted about it. The Child saw a blue-check apron, too, and great felt slippers on the treadle, and a few gray hairs, screwed into a tight little knot, small as a filbert, beneath a black cap.

The two watched the shuttle and the web and heard the clang of the loom as long as it was new ; and when they moved to go the weaver opened her thin lips for the first time and said they might pick up quinces in her garden, for there was going to be a frost by night. So the two Simple Ones picked up cold quinces till the daylight was gone ; and there was no more Time for them than if they had been Angels in the Sun. But that night when the wind shrieked and the Child lay with a swollen, throbbing throat, never knowing before what Night was like, all the sorrows of the transgressor piled their weight on its hot head, and it cried out in awe of the Unknown, like a certain pious little Queen-to-be, " I will be good."

For had not the mother searched every nook and corner in House and Garden, and sent the miller's son to drag the pond, just as a shivering little figure in blue gingham came loitering in sight, with a burnt ginger-cookie in the purple fist that did not grasp the sunbonnet, and tight little heart-strings that conscience was tugging at ? But these last did not show.

The Dame School in summer time held one only joy. It was the thought of hot July and August days, when the clouds piled up like woolly mountains, and lightnings streaked the sky. Then the Fate of the arm-chair, impelled by something mysterious and invisible, stopped work, stepped down, and gently shepherded her willing flock to a room across the hallway with one green-paper-darkened window and a high feather bed.

Any child was allowed to share the Bed of Safety with the Dame, whose dignity gave way before the God of Thunder, but there was not even a tradition that in the dark past ages any child had so demeaned itself as to accept the privilege.

The least ones played softly behind the one high-backed chair, while the elders crawled under the bed and whispered made-up stories, and came out linty and feathery when the storm was over, without a touch of the ferrule even from the Dame, who sat cowed in the middle of the bed, a deposed and sceptreless queen.

And so all her small flock revelled in storm

and thunder, and never knew what fear was, except to despise its image when they saw it.

The days went on and on, but the foolishness called school could not last for ever, and the Garden, like a reliable friend, was always waiting. It was the most wonderful Garden! When Scripture was read in the house on still Sabbath mornings, it stood for that First Garden—then and always afterwards, for fifty years and more.

The high wall to the right, across the river, covered with tall grass and hardy shrubs and a tree or two, was the place where the Almighty stood and called to disobedient Adam. And the Angel with the Flaming Sword had his own place behind the greening apple tree that was proxy to the Fall and that shaded the chicken-yard.

And when the Immortal Two went hand in hand barefooted out of Eden, they paced slowly past the rows of corn and potatoes and poles of beans, to the stone wall. There fancy left them to fade into thin air. The Beyond was hidden, even to the Child.

Not that the Child observed the practical Gar-

den much, only that Adam and Eve must pass in the direction of the Voice, and facts were stubborn but possible things. This portion of the Garden had no interest for the Child, who simply knew that a man came at times, and dug and planted and hoed when his presence was an intrusion.

It saw, dimly, green things sprouting, growing tall, climbing, blossoming, fading. Flowers, too, had their place: great clumps of peonies, hollyhocks loved of bumblebees, tall lilacs with sweet clusters of purple and white, and grapevines with blossoms infinitely sweeter that could not be picked—though they seemed to bear no natural relation to the purple fruit that came in the autumn. But law was law.

And there were beds of sweet alyssum and mignonette and masses of pinks that burst their bonds and fell over the border, a rain of sweetness; just old-fashioned pink pinks.

From the house-porch with two windows and a wide hall-door looking out under heavy eyebrows—two eyes and a long nose, the Child thought—ran a little crooked path to the Gar-

den. It stopped at the well, then bent around over a great flat rock, up and up, then down again, wavering through rough places, but always keeping its end in view, the Garden gate.

One long summer's day, a Saturday when school did not keep, the Child, who was heartily tired of shoes and stockings, begged to go barefooted to the Garden, and stoutly waived all elderly objections. So a tardy consent was gained, and the pink-and-white feet started bravely from the shelter of the porch, hesitated a fraction of a second by the well, and went slowly on. Some one who always knew best said the stones would hurt. They didn't—much. That they would cut; perhaps make the blood come. The Child screwed up its mouth, held tight by its sunbonnet strings, and walked on its heels and the outer edges of its feet. Then it stood on one foot, and curled up the other against the ankle of the standing one. But what if some "force of nature" should be looking from the porch-window.

The tiny seed Deceit dropped into barren

ground. For just ahead bloomed a royal bunch of catnip, a most luxuriant growth with the dew of the morning scarcely off its gray velvet leaves. The little feet were hot and sore, but the pursed-up mouth was resolute as ever. Once on the stone wall with a certainty of dipping both feet, of splashing in the water on the still side, of pressing it down and having it push back again—what joy! One foot brushed the tender tops of the catnip bunch, then both settled firmly down. But in its treacherous deeps a bumble-bee was quietly breakfasting, and his sudden resentment was cruel. If he could have known! But the Universe is arranged on such an awkward plan. There was one sharp, frightened-to-death scream, and the Child was picked up with the bee still clinging to the toe. It meant hours of pain, with a dizzy foot on a cushion, and the sad lesson learned, like most, alas! with too great suffering, that elders always know best.

So that day was lost. And everything in nature went on just the same.

Church days came often, when the mornings

were so still and long, and 'Pilgrim's Progress' was often read aloud before the walk to the House of God. The tabby-cat purred softly and stretched lazy claws on the grass at the sunny side of the porch. The air vibrated gently to the shock of falling water. Remote wheels, sounding near at hand, rolled leisurely up the hill, and here and there large and small figures by twos and threes followed the leadings of the bells. There was no hop, skip, and jump on the holy day. The Child was led softly by the hand with a bonnet tied beneath its chin and best shoes on its prim feet; shoes that pinched a little, for there was time to grow between the Lord's Days. But this was never mentioned, as they were pretty shoes, set apart and dedicated to the occasion, belonging to the sacredness of the day. And pain in some unknown way belonged to good things.

The river all along the road ran softly as that of the Prothalamion; but the birds just shouted and were not ashamed. All things else held themselves in reverently.

The pews of the white church had high seats

and straight backs : the prayers and hymns were long, and the preaching a sleepy mystery. If the deacon's wife had not now and then passed over the back of the pew a plump head of spreading carroway or arrowy dill, if a real church mouse had not peeped from under the footstool and kept expectation on the stretch, the hours must have been long indeed. Sometimes a joyful thunder-storm bursting with old-fashioned fury, broke up the services, and people gathered in awe-struck knots to whisper stories of lightning strokes not meant for little ears but quite unheeded by Dame-scholars. The dripping home in the rain was fun enough for a week-day. After the solemn dinner came hymns and 'Pilgrim's Progress,' but neither doll, story-book, nor Garden. The secular part of the Catechism was slowly spelled out in the long hours to the solemn ticking of a tall clock in the corner.

"In Adam's Fall
We sinned all."
"Thy life to mend
This Book attend."
"The Cat doth play
And after slay."

"The Dog will bite
A thief at night."
"Job feels the Rod,
Yet blesses God."
"The idle fool
Is whipped at school."

—which was in some way connected with Job's punishment in the Child's small mind.

"The Eagle's flight
Is out of sight."
"As runs the Glass
Man's life doth pass."
"Zaccheus he
Did climb the tree
His Lord to see."
"Proud Korah's troop
Was swallowed up."
"Young Obadiah,
David, Josiah,
All were pious."
"Xerxes the Great did die,
And so must you and I"—

which singled Xerxes out from the great, vague world full of alarming people, yet in some way lowered him to the Child's comprehension, and brought day-dreams of his glory.

If only the Garden days might have been half so long ! What journeys might the Child have

taken, sitting solitary on the stone wall above the flat rock that sloped to the deep water, and looking across to Harbor Woods. Many a time had Xerxes rounded the Point this side the Gulf with a fleet of glorified fishing smacks and purple banners. Red-white-and-blue streamed everywhere from the Conquering Ship, and a Band in the bow played Xerxes's favorite tunes, while the Commander waved his crown of gold and jewels toward the shore, and his yellow hair and velvet robes streamed in the wind. It was at the high point where the Almighty spoke to Adam in the Garden that the vessels always anchored, and Xerxes proudly knelt and kissed the wet sand, holding a gold cross as tall as himself, which was very tall, and naming the land. Well, perhaps it was not Xerxes; the thing only signified, and the vision and the glory were the Child's.

And sometimes the Crusaders, young and old, came singing across the Gulf like a heavenly choir, and the Child waited with a beating heart and moist eyes to see them round the Point, all in white, with red crosses on their garments and

harps in their hands. Many a time it dashed away the blinding tears lest they should come suddenly and be dim in its sight. Abigail said it was nothing but the men and boys digging clams the other side of the rock. So the Child did not tell Abigail what she heard any more.

One day when the Child sat on the low wall, built up of stones taken from the Garden, looking across the millstream, it saw Abigail coming, with shoes and stockings gathered up in her apron and knew that she dared come across. What if the great gate should be lifted up, and the flood come boiling down and sweep the bold girl away to the harbor and on to the sea, rolling and tossing like a dry leaf or a chip boat, shoes and stockings and all? Who in all the world could save her, and what would become of her soul unless she was prepared to die?

But Abigail came softly across, for the expected does not happen; and the water covered her feet and crisped up around her ankles. But it seemed really much deeper, because she held her skirts so high and walked delicately, like Agag before the Great King. That was because

of the stones that hurt her feet. Soon she scrambled up beside the Child and dangled her wet feet in the sun until such time as she could put on her shoes and stockings and play house. The Child never cared for a little square of ground fenced in with small stones, nor for a house built of corncobs, or of twigs and straws like a bird's nest ; nor for bits of pink and blue broken china carefully washed and stood on a shingle-shelf balanced on two stones. She did not care for sand pies and mud gingerbread baked in the sun, nor for dolls made of a stick and a pocket handkerchief. But unlike many wiser and older folk, she was willing to let Abigail enjoy herself in her chosen way, if only left free to think her own thoughts and choose her own pleasures. And while Abigail puttered about her house and scolded her children, shaking them well, and whisked up the floor with a bunch of limp grass, the Child, always looking for Something, saw the miller's other son coming to the flat rock in his father's dory.

"Want a sail?" he called. And then the children saw that he was stepping a mast into

the boat, made of a broken oar, and tying a bit of red and white shawl to it for a sail.

"Where are you goin'?" asked Abigail.

"Oh, somewhere," the Boy said. "Get in, both of you, and you'll know."

"Won't you tip us over?" asked the Child.

"No; not if you don't look," the Boy said tentatively. "I want you girls to shut your eyes tight, honor bright, and not open them till I say 'Now!'"

The children clambered into the boat, for this was one of the things unforbidden, because unforeseen, and the oars thumped in the rowlocks.

"Why can't we look?" the Child asked.

"Oh, because. You keep still, and see where I'll take you."

"Will you bring us back again?" asked Abigail. "My mother would feel bad if I didn't come back."

"Sure's you live," said the Boy, who was two sizes larger than they, and they trusted his word of honor, and folded their hands in the lap of their aprons.

"Is it most to Harbor Woods?" asked Abigail

again, as the waves curled softly about the bow and rippled away.

"Hush up!" said the Boy manfully. "I'm givin' you a sail."

"But where are we?" the child persisted; and the Boy was silent, like his kind. "I wisht I knew," she sighed; and the Boy at last took pity, and said gruffly, "You'll see."

"Better not go out in the Gulf," said Abigail again, for it was her own brother, accustomed to feminine advice. "Sloops might run into us and tip us over. Sail's dangerous. Mother said so."

The Oracle rocked the boat gently, and the passengers clutched the gunwale.

But the Child did not speak. Its eyes were shining under their screwed-up lids, and its breath came with thrills that tingled down to its feet.

They must be at Harbor Woods now—around the Point—out in the Gulf, that green place of awful deeps. Oh, where were they going? The strain was too great. But would he tip them over if they looked? He had said, honor bright;

no, if they didn't look. The Child could scarcely breathe now. She thought it was like Death; that fearful thing that comes and stops one's breath, and that even a mother cannot forbid, nor shield one from. The Child was too young to know that it was already in Eternity, hemmed in by Time, and that the Soul may go out softly in death as in dreams.

They were going through the great, green Gulf of the Unknown Ocean. And with a sail!

The Child knew it must cry out in time—very soon—"Oh, mother, mother!" The first cry and the last of helpless humanity launched on Unknown tides.

"Now!" said the Boy.

The boat grated on the sand, the children opened dazed eyes, and dimly saw their own flat rock, their own stone wall, The Garden.

If the Child were to go back to the Garden after fifty years, would it sit on the stone wall and dip its feet in the water, pushing it down until it pushed back, and look out to Harbor Woods for Xerxes and the Crusaders? Why not? And if the big timber of the mighty dam

has shrunken with the years like the miller, and the breadth of the fall narrowed that a man may leap across it ; if the bottomless pits can be sounded with a little longer stick, and the path from the porch is only a sheep-walk up a hand's-breadth rise of rock and down again ; if the height from which the Almighty called to Adam has a house on it, and the apple tree is bowed and mossy with age ; if the Garden itself, like the British Islands, is shrinking from the sea, what matters it if only the years have left the heart of the Child ?

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